The compulsory online experience: understanding EdD students’ perspectives of program transition during COVID-19

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this study was to understand perspectives of doctoral students about their compulsory online experience and aspects of their compulsory online experiences which were strongly associated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, a disorienting dilemma.

Design/methodology/approach – Exploratory descriptive survey research was the approach taken. Notable descriptors and associations were interpreted based on statistical analysis complimented by respondent comments.

Findings – Respondents included students who were at various stages of completing their doctoral degree. Overall findings indicated preference for face-to-face classes, the switch to online learning was well-received, primarily as a result of perceptions of quick and supportive communication from doctoral program leadership, strong student and instructor connections, and high-quality collaborative opportunities.

Research limitations/implications – The COVID-19 pandemic represented a disorienting dilemma provoking cognitive dissonance among doctoral students who were compelled to move from a hybrid to a completely online learning model. Fear, anger and discontent induced by broken assumptions were mitigated through shared experiences creating new meaning and habits of mind in the process of adjusting to new expectations. Study results reveal that engagement, collaboration and support among instructors and classmates eased the transformative process transitioning into online learning.

Practical implications – The results of this study provided real-time understanding of students’ needs in order to be successful in the quest and persistence of doctoral study online. Though the process of seeking official and state approvals to move the educational leadership doctoral program fully online, program faculty made a series of teaching and program adaptations informed by these results.

Originality/value – Research about doctoral student experiences during a compulsory transition from a hybrid to online delivery model has not been explored and offers original perspective to improve future practice transitioning into online programs for student acceptance, engagement and retention.

Keywords Transitioning to online learning, Doctoral student experiences, Doctoral program, COVID-19

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
The initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 created a critical need for social distancing to reduce reality and ensure public safety (Lederman, 2021). Rapidly after the COVID-19 crisis, higher education institutions (HEIs) were required to shift from in-person classrooms to online classroom instruction within a matter of days and provide students with an online learning platform (Cutri et al., 2020; Delcker and Ifenthaler, 2021; Lederman, 2021; McNamara, 2021). Online classroom instruction shifted higher education towards a need for improved strategic approaches or pedagogical delivery and content during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bao, 2020; Khan et al., 2020; McNamara et al., 2021).

Students’ perceptions of online remote learning are mediated by their learning skills, home learning environment and engagement (Cranfield et al., 2021). As the shift towards remote learning becomes potentially more permanent, there is a need to understand how to garner...
resources and training for remote learning approaches to most positively impact student outcomes (Laili and Nashir, 2021; Rinekso and Muslim, 2020). This study reports the findings of exploratory descriptive survey research designed to understand perceptions of Doctor of Education (EdD) students moving from a hybrid cohort model into a compulsory online experience due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Two research questions are addressed and were posed guided by Mezirow’s transformative learning framework. Results offer practical implications for programs exploring options to transition to online delivery. A background situated within current literature was developed. Methods used to conduct the study are explained. Findings and their implications are presented. A discussion of findings in regard to previous research is presented. Changes made to the program are explained. A general conclusion is drawn about the most significant considerations to facilitate students’ success.

**Research questions**

Our research was guided by two research questions (RQs):

- **RQ1.** What are the perspectives of EdD students about their compulsory online experience as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- **RQ2.** What aspects of compulsory online experiences are very strongly associated among EdD students who transitioned online as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

**Framework**

The theory of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997) explicates that learning occurs in instances when learners experience changes or a position of discomfort: cognitive dissonance. Essentially what occurs is the learner first experiences a disorienting dilemma, self-examines feelings of fear and/or anger in response, takes a critical assessment of assumptions, recognizes that discontent and the process of transformation is shared, then engages in a process of developing new meaning and new habits of mind in adjustment to the new roles and expectations of the learning experience (Mezirow, 1997).

We believe the theory of transformative learning aptly applies to the focus of this study because the COVID-19 pandemic is an ideal example of a disorienting dilemma. The pandemic created discord in the education system world-wide. Schools were forced closed to mitigate transmission of the disease, and teaching and learning moved into cyberspace. Essentially, informed by transformative learning theory, this study aims to understand how learning occurred during and how educational leadership doctoral students received the compulsory online learning experience as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Inherently, this study’s participating students and researchers alike are encouraged to reflect upon and develop new perspectives about the online learning experience which serve to inform educators about ways to continually create a learning environment conducive to educational goals.

**Background**

Higher education online outcomes are impacted by instructional key strategies, design and student learning alignment, effective delivery of online education information, the support provided by faculty and teaching assistants for students, and the participation and depth of student learning (Bao, 2020). At the onset of the pandemic, faculty were expected to quickly shift to teach remotely and ensure student satisfaction with online education (Erarslan, 2021). Students’ satisfaction is influenced by their self-efficacy, perceived ease of use and usefulness...
of the platforms (Jiang et al., 2021). Yet, there was a lack of institutional training and resources for effective online instruction materials (Cranfield et al., 2021; Kohnke and Moorhouse, 2021). The rapid transition to online classroom instruction impacted student outcomes based on unpreparedness or lacking resources among faculty (Sujarwo et al., 2020). Students reported high levels of dissatisfaction with online classroom instruction due to educators’ lack of preparedness and proficiency with online classroom instruction platforms (Samifanni and Gumanit, 2021; Shahzad and Aurangzeb, 2021).

Educators face and technology preference or usage could influence student outcomes and satisfaction with online classroom instruction (Samifanni and Gumanit, 2021). Many students in higher education encounter barriers and disappointment with management system software and could not access lectures in remote learning when higher education instructors do not use videos or PowerPoints within their face-to-face lectures (Shahzad and Aurangzeb, 2021). Higher education institutions need to have a better understanding of how to support faculty as a means of supporting the well-being as well as the academic outcomes of both students and faculty (Budur, 2020; Teymori and Fardin, 2020).

Researchers noted that remote learning could provide flexibility for students (Burki, 2020; Laili and Nashir, 2021). Students reported being satisfied with the flexibility and accessibility of learning despite the pandemic (Aristovnik et al., 2020). Thus, staff readiness, resources, student accessibility, motivation and flexibility are key variables in ensuring appropriate outcomes for students and educators (Ali, 2020).

**Challenges during COVID-19**

Students and teachers reported difficulty in terms of communication and overall engagement with pedagogical material during the COVID-19 pandemic’s quick shift to online classroom instruction (Code et al., 2020; Smith and Kaya, 2021). Strategies to address potential outcomes were ineffective for many educators and students during the pandemic (Ali, 2020; Bao, 2020; Mncube et al., 2021). Regardless of strategic approaches, educators and students faced differential challenges in personal and external factors associated with the HEIs (Ali et al., 2021; Kovacs et al., 2021; Paguio et al., 2021).

Techniques and instructional strategies employed by professors and higher education institutions are critical to student outcomes (Samifanni and Gumanit, 2021; Shahzad and Aurangzeb, 2021). Faculty faced different challenges in terms of the online classroom instruction transition, such as internal and external factors related to their ability to teach online, as well as exposure to continued isolation and physical and psychological health outcomes associated with the now remote setting (Al-Maskari et al., 2022; Delcker and Ifenthaler, 2021; Edelhauser and Lupu-Dima, 2021).

Issues such as Internet connectivity and poor technological resources are central challenges for students during the shift to online classroom instruction (Burki, 2020; Laili and Nashir, 2021; Rinekso and Muslim, 2020). Students feel that online learning could be effective; however, the inability to access educational content on tablets or smartphones reduces their inability to access flexible learning approaches (Agormedah et al., 2020). Students in rural or underdeveloped areas report that lacking Internet connection and technological resources affects their online learning (Adnan and Anwar, 2020). Students of differing regional, geographical, cultural, or socio-demographic variables are less likely to have the same opportunities for flexibility, resources, technology and stable Internet access as individuals of higher socioeconomic status (Cranfield et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2021).

**Impact of remote learning**

Stress from the pandemic negatively impacted students socially and academically (Aristovnik et al., 2020). Students’ perceptions of remote learning were mediated by social,
cultural and economic factors, which require improved delivery of instructional material (Cranfield et al., 2021). Students reported a need for differing pedagogical approaches that would ensure their ability to engage with the class (Mishra et al., 2020). Students are concerned about poor social cohesion and socialization in an online classroom instruction environment (Smith and Kaya, 2021). Students report that a lack of FaceTime, poor timely response from instructors, and poor social cohesion among students negatively impacted their academic outcomes in remote learning (Adnan and Anwar, 2020; Rasiah et al., 2020). The effectiveness of online learning was also a concern of some students based on the technological platform and instructors’ knowledge of online classroom approaches (Rasiah et al., 2020). Students and instructors who are new to online learning often struggle with a lacking understanding of technology skills (Rasiah et al., 2020).

Poor preparedness, lack of competence and poor self-efficacy for teaching in remote learning settings are also challenges for faculty (Ashour et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2020). Flexibility and appropriate feedback offered by instructors significantly influence students’ ability to succeed in online learning (Rasiah et al., 2020). Students who struggle with the implementation and approaches by teachers are most likely to have negative or reduced perceptions of the efficacy of remote learning (Cranfield et al., 2021). Students’ online learning experiences are often based on the instructor’s efforts with technological proficiency (Rasiah et al., 2020). Improved transitional programs provide quality and rigorous education online formats to prepare instructors for the quick shift that occurs to online or blended learning approaches (Ali et al., 2021; Kovacs et al., 2021).

Methodology
This exploratory descriptive study used survey research with questionnaire items adopted from an existing survey instrument designed to assess students’ perceptions of the online learning experience. The population consisted of 101 doctoral students in a traditionally hybrid doctoral program of study that was compelled to online delivery due to the pandemic. Recruitment occurred via email. Questions were administered online via SurveyMonkey to understand the perceptions of EdD students enrolled during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Setting
This study was conducted among students enrolled in an educational leadership doctoral program at a regional, minority and Hispanic-serving institution. This doctoral program course sequence consists of 60 semester credit hours, 42 h of which are core classes. Students are enrolled in the program as a part of a cohort; a group which proceeds through the core sequence as a unit. At the time of the study, the program was 30 years in existence operating as a hybrid program since 2015. Thus, at the point of the compulsory transition to remote learning, faculty and students in the program were already prepared for online engagement and supported with appropriate technologies. Doctoral are taught and advised by a small but tight knit group of five core faculty members and several adjuncts.

Population and sample
The study was conducted in an educational leadership doctoral program at a regionally accredited institution, traditionally offered in a hybrid format, but forced to transition to online delivery as a result of the global pandemic. At the time of the study, the population included the total of 101 students who were enrolled in the doctoral program. The population of students included those at any one of three stages of program enrollment at the point of the compulsory online transition: (1) students who were near completion of the doctoral program course sequence, lacking only the dissertation (all but dissertation); (2) students who were
currently enrolled in the doctoral program course sequence and thus completed a portion of the program in its hybrid format and a portion of the program in the online format; and, (3) students who were newly admitted to the program, expecting a hybrid learning experience but thrust into the online learning model. The sample represented volunteers who responded to the survey.

Recruitment
Institutional Review Board approval was obtained to conduct the study. Participants were recruited via email. Online administration of the survey allowed for direct, accurate and secure storage of the data collected. Because respondents were not required to provide identifying information on the survey, responses remained anonymous. The survey was distributed in the Fall academic term of the year 2020, still at the height of the pandemic and widespread remote learning and work for much of the world.

Instrumentation
The online survey was comprised of a total of 34 questions, including a modified adaptation of Bernard et al. (2004)’s instrument to assess the perspectives of the compulsory online learning experience. Bernard et al.’s instrument was considered valid and reliable because (1) the instrument was developed as an expansion of the “Readiness for Online Learning Questionnaire” developed and pilot-tested by McVay (2001) and; (2) Bernard et al. conducted an extensive literature review pertinent to distance education and online learning and developed additional question items using themes found. Reliability testing coefficients, after factor analyzing (theming) the questionnaire, determined that the instrument was reliable (Bernard et al., 2004).

Question items covered access to Internet; comfort with electronic communication; belief in success and learning online versus traditional classroom; motivation by material covered in class; difficulty of completing and passing an online course; contact with instructor as necessary for learning; ease of collaboration with classmates; engagement with classmates, instructor and course content in online class; confidence in ability to use asynchronous and synchronous technologies; ease asking instructor or classmates for help or support; ease accessing instructor feedback; preference for online courses; and contentment with the quality of courses. The final survey question was open-ended allowing respondents to provide any additional comments regarding the experience or expectations of the online educational leadership doctoral program. The survey also included a series of questions designed to collect profiling information such as gender, ethnicity, age, presence of children, employment shifts, previous experience with online coursework and status of enrollment in the program.

Analysis
Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted to explore notable perceptions and associations. Percentage distributions were calculated as were Spearman rho bivariate associations between all non-profile question items on the instrument. Perceptions were deemed notable if at least 70% of participants responded in a patterned way. Stronger than typical \( \rho > 0.70 \) statistically significant \( p < 0.001 \) bivariate Spearman rho associations were deemed notable (Morgan et al., 2020).

The final three questions of the survey administered were open-ended to allow for respondents’ perspectives about (Q#32) what [the respondent] would like to share about the EdD experience regarding COVID-19, (Q#33) what was needed to make the EdD experience workable during COVID-19 and (Q#34) any other additional comments regarding
experiences with and/or expectations of the online EdD program. Research Question 1 asks for the perceptions of EdD students about their compulsory online experience as a result of COVID-19. To answer this, the researchers engaged in a process of evaluation coding, a qualitative data analysis approach appropriate for purposes of evaluating policy, programs, and organizations (Saldana, 2021). Evaluation coding is achieved in four phases of data analysis: analysis of the data for their patterns; interpretation of their significance; judgment of the results; and recommendations for action (Patton, 2008).

Findings
A total of 53 of the 101 EdD students surveyed participated for a response rate of 52%. Of the responding group, 35% \( (n = 18) \) completed the hybrid cohort model and were working on dissertation only, 46% \( (n = 23) \) started with the hybrid cohort model but moved to the online learning model, and 19% \( (n = 10) \) were students newly admitted, expecting a hybrid cohort model but moved into the online only experience.

Respondent profile
A majority of the respondents (68%, \( n = 36 \)) were female, Hispanic (66%, \( n = 34 \)) and between the ages of 25–55 (90%, \( n = 49 \)). Nearly all participants indicated a profession in the education system with most (97%, \( n = 52 \)) working in K-12 or higher education; one respondent identified as a full-time student. 74% of respondents were working remotely/online from home at the time of the survey, and 42% had school-aged children at home and learning online. All respondents indicated that prior to the compulsory move to online learning, each had previously enrolled in at least 3 semester credit hours of online coursework offerings, with 54% of the sample group reporting having enrolled in 12 or more semester credit hours of online learning at some point in their educational career.

Notable perceptions and associations
The results indicated that 70% of respondents disagreed that learning is the same in a traditional, face-to-face classroom as it is at home, on the Internet. Agreement that online learning is the same as traditional, face-to-face learning was strongly associated with belief in success in online courses \( (\rho = +0.76) \), belief that a course can be completed online with no difficulty \( (\rho = +0.70) \) and motivation by materials in class \( (\rho = +0.76) \) (see Table 1).

Key implication: students’ belief in their potential for success in an online course is important and students’ belief is affected by class materials
While 90% of respondents felt confident in their abilities to use asynchronous technologies and web conferencing tools, there were no strong associations with confidence in respondents’ abilities pertinent to other aspects of online learning. Ability with technologies were not associated with other aspects of online learning in this study likely because students were already prepared for hybrid and supported by their institution. To

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables associated with belief that online learning is the same as face-to-face</th>
<th>Online course can be completed with no difficulty</th>
<th>Motivated by materials in online class</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online learning is the same as face-to-face</td>
<td>( \rho = +0.76 )</td>
<td>( \rho = +0.70 )</td>
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Source(s): Authors’ own creation/work

Table 1.
that end, 25% of respondents anticipated that learning online would be difficult, but over 80% believed that they could pass their classes without additional assistance. This was confirmed by a strong association between the belief that a course can be completed online without difficulty and a belief that students can be as successful in an online class as they could be in a traditional, face-to-face classroom setting \((\rho = +0.74)\) (see Table 2).

Further, the belief that a course can be completed online without difficulty was strongly associated with engagement with the instructor, classmates and course content \((\rho = +0.78)\). In this study, 70% of respondents believe that contact with the instructor is necessary for learning to occur, and 85% believed it to be fairly easy to collaborate with other students in an online class. This was confirmed by a very strong association with ease of collaboration among students and the instructor \((\rho = +0.81)\).

**Key implication: engagement is key to students believing they will be successful online**

Respondents indicated that collaboration among instructor and students is important for learning. 84% of respondents believed that in the experience of the shift to online learning, they have good contact with their instructor, classmates and course content; 72% believed it is easy to get support from their classmates when needed. This was confirmed with evidence of a series of strong associations: ease of asking classmates for support and engagement with instruction, classmates, and course content \((\rho = +0.72)\); ease of getting and discussing feedback received and engagement with instructor, classmates, and course content \((\rho = +0.74)\); ease of getting and discussing feedback received and ease of asking for help from instructor \((\rho = +0.72)\); and ease of asking for help from instructor and ease of asking classmates for support \((\rho = +0.71)\) (see Table 3).

**Key implication: ease of seeking and getting support are important for engagement in an online course**

Results indicated that 71% of respondents agreed that they would be just as successful with online coursework as they would if the course were offered in a traditional, face-to-face classroom setting. Still, over one-half of the respondents (57%) preferred face-to-face classes over online classes. Preference for online classes over face-to-face classes was associated with:

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**Table 2.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables associated with belief that online course can be completed with no difficulty</th>
<th>(\rho = +0.74)</th>
<th>(\rho = +0.78)</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can be as successful in an online class as in a face-to-face class</td>
<td>(\rho = +0.74)</td>
<td>(\rho = +0.78)</td>
<td>(\rho = +0.81)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engagement with instructor, classmates and course content</td>
<td>(\rho = +0.72)</td>
<td>(\rho = +0.74)</td>
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<td>Source(s): Authors’ own creation/work</td>
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<td>Engagement with instructor, classmates and course content</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ease of asking for help from instructor</td>
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<td>(\rho = +0.72)</td>
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<td>Source(s): Authors’ own creation/work</td>
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</table>
(1) Belief in success in online is the same as traditional (face to-face) setting ($\rho = +0.79$)
(2) Belief that course can be completed online without difficulty ($\rho = +0.76$)
(3) Engagement with instructor, classmates and course content ($\rho = +0.78$)
(4) Contentment with quality of course ($\rho = +0.77$) (see Table 4)

**Key implication: preference for online courses is driven by quality of course, belief in success and engagement**

Pertinent to the quality of the online learning experience, 85% expressed contentment with the quality of the online learning experience. Contentment with quality of online class was associated with the belief that course can be completed online without difficulty ($\rho = +0.76$), engagement with instructor, classmates and course content ($\rho = +0.77$), and ease getting and discussing feedback received ($\rho = +0.75$) (see Table 5).

**Key implication: quality of the online learning experience is based on belief of difficulty, instructor feedback and engagement with course**

Comments provided by the respondents spoke to a general understanding that the shift to remote instruction was inevitable as a result of the pandemic and expressed empathy as many respondents themselves experienced a similar transition in their workplaces. Respondents noted an appreciation for the quick communication by doctoral program administrators regarding the plan to stay online as an act of consideration for students enrolled. Most respondents did note a general preference to have face-to-face interactions in learning environments.

Those respondents who were able to complete much more of the doctoral program its original hybrid format noted that they will always appreciate the benefit of having built strong connections during the in-person class meetings before COVID-19 changed the delivery format.

Respondents new to the doctoral program, expecting a hybrid program but thrust into a fully online program, spoke of the blessing in disguise, as they too experienced an unexpected

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Preference for online classes over face-to-face classes</th>
<th>$\rho = +0.79$</th>
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<th>$\rho = +0.78$</th>
<th>$\rho = +0.77$</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Success in online is the same as traditional (face to-face) setting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Course can be completed online without difficulty</td>
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**Source(s):** Authors’ own creation/work

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<tr>
<th>Contentment with the quality of the online class</th>
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shift in their personal and professional work settings. The transition to online delivery afforded them with flexibility to continue their plans of study in a scenario that might have otherwise changed their ability to persist.

Overall findings indicate that although a majority of respondents indicated preference for face-to-face classes, the switch to online learning was well-received, primarily as a result of perceptions of quick and supportive communication from doctoral program leadership, strong student and instructor connections, and high-quality collaborative opportunities. Results confirm and disaffirm previous findings and offer practical implications for programs exploring options to transition to online delivery.

Discussion
The COVID-19 pandemic represented a disorienting dilemma provoking cognitive dissonance among doctoral students who were compelled to move from a hybrid to a completely online learning model. Fear, anger and discontent induced by broken assumptions were mitigated through shared experiences creating new meaning and habits of mind in the process of adjusting to new expectations. Study results reveal that engagement, collaboration and support among instructors and classmates eased the transformative process transitioning into online learning.

Preparation for online learning lessoned the response time and helped with the rapid transition noted by Cutri et al. (2020), Delcker and Ifenthaler (2021), Lederman (2021) and McNamara (2021). The institution with which they were affiliated was already technologically ready to support the program as called for by Zarei and Mohammadi (2021) because of its history with hybrid courses. Faculty were already prepared in hybrid mode with Instructional strategies and techniques critical to student outcomes (Samifannini and Gumanit, 2021; Shahzad and Aurangzeb, 2021).

New doctoral students compelled to move completely online format expressed appreciation for the accessibility and flexibility to remain in the program during the pandemic, one of the benefits of online learning (Burki, 2020; Laili and Nashir, 2021).

Results of the current study confirm teacher effects. Instructor support and feedback were strongly associated with engagement and perceptions of quality as Rasiah et al. (2020) and Cranfield et al. (2021) found. Ease of instructors providing support and students accessing feedback was enhanced by instructor technological proficiency as noted by Rasiah et al. (2020).

Proficiency of instructors and students relieved the stress of transitioning to online classes because they were easily able to collaborate, engage and support each other. These interactions built and maintained social cohesion which affects perceptions of academic difficulty and outcomes (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Cranfield et al., 2021; Mishra et al., 2020). Timely response of instructors, interactions among classmates to support each other and the use of conferencing applications for face-to-face virtual meetings improved engagement and perceptions of quality and chances for good academic outcomes (Adnan and Anwar, 2020; Smith and Kaya, 2021).

Changes as implications for practice
The experience of the compulsory transition to online teaching and learning during the pandemic provided a momentous learning opportunity to inform the pursuit of a fully online doctoral program. Students, at the time of the study, were already overwhelmed both as working adults in a stressful education field and with family members also working, teaching and learning online. The results of this study provided real-time understanding of students’ needs in order to be successful in the quest and persistence of doctoral study. Though the process of seeking official and state approvals to move the educational leadership doctoral
program fully online, program faculty made a series of adaptations informed by these results. The following discussion on programmatic changes made as a result of our findings is offered as a summary of recommendations for practice for doctoral programs seeking to offer online delivery of instruction.

Teaching changes
In order to accommodate students’ needs for engagement, collaboration and ease of access to support and feedback from instructors and peers, all courses in the doctoral program kept a synchronous meeting component to emulate the face-to-face engagement found to be so vital to student success. Faculty adopted and broadened use of online texts and resource materials, delineated expectations for capstone dissertation research and continued to develop meaning of the cohort model in an online setting through enhanced communication and collaborative opportunities to build relationships.

Preparation changes
The program now offers a two-part virtual orientation prior to students’ first term of coursework in order to provide more and earlier opportunities for engagement. Students whose admission is processed with time to do so are encouraged to enroll for cognate courses (18 h of the degree plan) prior to the start of core classes to acclimate to the online learning platform and to permit sole focus on the core sequence.

Faculty changes
Social and emotional health awareness is heightened and of priority among faculty. The experience of online learning during the pandemic resulted in the ability for doctoral faculty to be responsive through providing a “safe space” for students to express themselves about personal and professional challenges and frustrations (i.e. domestic violence, suicide ideation). This redefined and deepened the concept of mentorship. To strengthen relationships and nurture the development of educational leaders, faculty worked to dedicate time out of class to vent when doctoral students were at the edge and made concerted efforts to discuss student well-being in program meetings. Students expressed appreciation for heightened accessibility to faculty and hypervigilance regarding presence or absence, either academically or emotionally.

Limitations
This study is limited in that the program studied existed as a hybrid program prior to compulsory online learning. Infrastructure and student familiarity with the online learning management system already in place and may have influenced students’ ability to adjust to the new delivery model.

Recommendations
Future research is warranted to reveal best practices in increasing and sustaining student engagement, notably in programs utilizing a cohort-model. Research is also important to understand best practices and student needs in the dissertation writing process in an online doctoral program. Further, because this study was conducted in response to compulsory online learning as a result of the pandemic, a longitudinal study is recommended to determine if programmatic changes implemented sustain students’ success.
Conclusion
The disorienting dilemma of being compelled to teach and learn in a fully online environment was experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. This disorienting dilemma tested higher education faculty and students in their ability to teach and learn. Fully online learning offers benefits of convenience and access for students of higher education not only during crises but anytime. Study results of doctoral students’ perspectives of being compelled to pivot to online learning both confirm and add to the body of literature about creating an online environment conducive to teaching and learning. Confirmed were the importance of student engagement, instructor support and instructor feedback as necessary for student success. Further emphasized by study results were the importance of considering students’ perspectives, communicating among all stakeholders, collaborating and maintaining high expectations for quality coursework in successfully transitioning online. These aspects can be heeded by programs making the transition to online delivery to improve program outcomes.

References
The compulsory online learning experience


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